

The USSR's Growing China Problem: Possible Soviet Initiatives

1. Soviets have found post-Mao PRC leadership even harder to deal with.
 - Soviet hopes for tension reduction with less hostile post-Mao leadership dashed.
 - Soviets surprised by sharpness and comprehensiveness of PRC swing to right under leadership expected to lack cohesion.
 - Soviets see Chinese capitalizing on their anti-Soviet credentials, with little incentive for moderating.
2. Third country responsiveness to PRC's anti-Soviet diplomatic outreach worries Soviets most.
 - Brzezinski visit and follow-ons.
 - Enthusiastic receptions for Hua, Teng, and others.
 - Negotiations with the West for military technology.
 - Prospects of large deals to modernize Chinese economy.
 - For Soviets, all this signifies that many third countries are displaying less sensitivity to Soviet interests than Moscow expected and believes is its due. Third countries were expected to display more restraint in cozying up to the weak enemy of their powerful enemy.
 - Soviets see the West, less inclined itself to compete vigorously with Soviets, attracted by PRC as actively hostile and willing surrogate to be built up against the USSR.
3. Soviets see their policies for coping with the Chinese as having failed.
 - Complaints, cajolery, vague warnings of dire but unspecified consequences have not worked. Soviets have failed to articulate a declaratory policy that is either credible or effective.
 - Vocal complaints increase political costs to Moscow of actions they are designed to discourage and encourage Western "China card players" to press on by demonstrating Soviet sensitivity.
 - Feigned indifference (e.g. Kapitsa) deprives USSR of all leverage.
 - Soviet failure to deter hostile Chinese behavior, or to dissuade third countries from cooperating with PRC displays Soviet impotence, weakens USSR's credibility, in Asia and globally.

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- Soviet leaders may be exploring new initiatives that could slow down or reverse damaging trends fueled by China's militant anti-Sovietism and by responsiveness of third countries to Chinese approaches.
- 4. Soviets can attempt to offer stronger inducements to or exert greater pressure on third countries trafficking with PRC; or they can attempt to influence the PRC directly.

Toward third countries

- The key issues are military technology transfer and Western investment in Chinese economic modernization.
- Large number of states which have already expressed willingness to deal with Chinese deprives Moscow of good opportunities to exert leverage on any one of them in isolation.
- Soviets see no deals currently under consideration as likely to alter significantly Sino-Soviet military balance in short run, but are anxious about precedent, concerned about other kinds of PRC security cooperation which transfers may presage, and fear long-term implications for growth of Chinese power and threat to Soviet security.

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-- US seen as encouraging, facilitating transfers by others while abstaining from direct military transaction with PRC.

- Moscow will probably attempt in a SALT II "renewed detente" environment to get firm US commitment to USSR not to supply military technology to PRC.

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Soviets probably believe their ability to bribe potential military suppliers or investors from dealing with China is too limited to make much difference.

-- They probably also believe that intensified pressure or threats to dissuade Western countries would compromise other Soviet goals (e.g., the "deep roots" that detente has taken in Western Europe [Kosygin]) and would be counterproductive.

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Toward the PRC

- Moscow does not know if Peking has a price for easing its anti-Soviet stand, but what Soviets are willing to offer is clearly of no interest now to Chinese. Soviets see PRC as profiting enormously from stridently anti-Soviet positions.
- Merely maintaining a large margin of military superiority is without perceptible political effect on PRC.
- Soviets may now be in a frame of mind to put the Chinese in their place, to expose them to would-be allies as unreliable blusterers, to shake the confidence of the new Peking leadership.
- 5. The Indochina imbroglio provides Moscow both with a fresh challenge and a possible opportunity to turn back Peking's offensive.
 - The south-to-north escalatory potential of the Vietnamese-Cambodian conflict is high.
 - The level of violence is likely to rise soon.
 - Commitments of prestige by the USSR and PRC to the respective combatants are growing.
 - The Soviets may see a substantial potential at the least for embarrassing, discrediting the PRC.
 - Moscow may regard the risks of deeper involvement in Indochina as manageable.
 - The Chinese do not seem inclined and are not now postured to intervene in force against the SRV.
 - If not prevented by the Chinese, Vietnamese success against Cambodia is likely to damage Chinese credibility and to be attributed in large part to the Soviet-Vietnamese Treaty.
 - Should the Chinese place heavy military pressure on Vietnam, much less launch main force attacks, pressure on Soviets to react against the PRC will be great and they might seize the opportunity to deliver a 1969-type lesson to the PRC.

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- The Soviets probably rate as a success their punitive attacks on the PRC after the 1969 Damansky incident.
 - A Soviet-backed Vietnamese defeat of Pot might impact adversely on Soviet efforts to woo ASEAN states, but Moscow has little going for it there in any case.
 - Effects on Japan would probably be ambivalent, but Soviets might bank on coercive impact as being dominant.
 - Soviets probably see US as largely out of it; allergic to reinvolvement in Indochina; uncomfortable about showing any sympathy for the Pot regime in Cambodia; not wishing to write off chances to wean Vietnam away from the USSR; but also reluctant to be perceived by PRC as insensitive to Chinese security concerns. Soviets probably believe cross-pressure will immobilize US, unless Indochina escalation leads to heavy Sino-Soviet fighting, which USSR in any case would seek to avoid and which PRC could not afford to provoke.
6. Under the circumstances, the probability of Soviet involvement in escalated Indochina fighting -- via conspicuous military assistance to Vietnam or even through direct military interaction with the PRC, is high enough for US to be concerned.

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